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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAMAKO 000141

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [ML](#)  
SUBJECT: AQIM TACTICS FORCE RED CROSS TO RECONSIDER  
PRESENCE IN NORTHERN MALI

REF: A. 08 BAMAKO 00942  
[B. BAMAKO 00024](#)  
[C. BAMAKO 00071](#)  
[D. BAMAKO 00037](#)

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako,  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) Summary: On March 4, Juan Coderque, the Dakar-based regional Director of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), told the Ambassador that the ICRC was reviewing its operations in north-east Mali following the recent kidnappings of two Canadian diplomats and four European tourists by AQIM. Coderque said he intended to ask the Malian government to allow the ICRC to visit "Islamic radicals" captured by Mali - a reference to the two Mauritanian AQIM operatives captured by Malian security forces in the northern town of Gao in 2008. One of these prisoners is reliably reported to have died following a February 26 vehicle accident that occurred while the Malians were transferring the two Mauritians from Gao to Bamako. Coderque suggested he would argue that granting the ICRC access to captured "Islamic radicals" could result in improved treatment of the western hostages currently held by AQIM. Coderque asked if the U.S. would support the ICRC's request to visit imprisoned "Islamic extremists." The ICRC has made moderate progress in its pursuit for approval to visit captured Tuareg rebels. Malian officials who previously claimed that a Tuareg rebel who died in Malian custody on January 15 had succumbed to illness recently recanted, telling the Embassy that the individual had been severely beaten by Malian paramilitary members following his capture on January 12. The ICRC was unable to shed light on the death of this individual. The ICRC's message to the Malian government - no security in northern Mali means no ICRC - is unlikely to spur Malian officials to action, yet serves as another sad example of the consequences for civilian populations living in proximity to AQIM. End Summary.

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Northern Mali May Be Too Risky for ICRC  
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2.(C) On March 4 visiting ICRC Regional Director Juan Coderque told the Ambassador that the ICRC was reviewing operations in north-eastern Mali in light of AQIM's new strategy of capturing westerners for ransom. The ICRC increased its presence in Mali and Niger in 2008 in response to heightened Tuareg unrest and large numbers of civilians displaced by fighting between Tuareg rebel groups and government forces. In Mali, this led to the permanent assignment of one ICRC representative in Bamako and another representative in the northern town of Gao. Over the past year, the ICRC has been extremely active in providing humanitarian support to local populations displaced by fighting in the region of Kidal and to several hundred non-Malian migrants deported by Algerian authorities to the

northern Malian town of Tinzawaten. The ICRC has also visited Malian soldiers held prisoner by Tuareg rebel groups and Tuareg rebels captured by Malian forces.

3.(C) Coderque noted that security concerns have always been an issue in northern Mali. The key concerns include chronic banditry, Tuareg rebel movements, and AQIM. Although banditry is a serious problem, previous incidents have been limited to non-violent carjackings. The ICRC fell victim to this in October 2008 when it lost two landcruisers, both carrying the ICRC's trademark red cross emblem, to bandits outside of Kidal (Ref. A). The vehicles' occupants, who included the ICRC's resident representative in Bamako, Sabine Manetta, were detained by the bandits for several hours before being let go. They were rescued a few hours later. The missing landcrusiers were never found.

4.(C) We briefed Coderque that since the February disarmament of the Tuareg rebel Alliance for Democracy and Change, and the military defeat - at least for now - of rogue Tuareg rebel leader Ibrahim Bahanga, security on this front has shown a marked improvement. Coderque said the recent outbreak of peace between Tuareg rebels and the Malian government meant the ICRC was needed in Kidal more than ever to help displaced Tuareg civilian populations return to normality. The threat of kidnapping by AQIM, however, is effectively preventing the ICRC from playing this role.

5.(C) Coderque said that in light of AQIM's new strategy of seeking to acquire and hold westerners for ransom, the ICRC was no longer inclined to be present in northern Mali. He acknowledged that such a decision posed a serious dilemma for

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the ICRC, which is expected to operate in environments where governments or other international organizations are unable to tread. He indicated that the ICRC was looking for innovative ways of mitigating the evident security concerns, but seemed less than optimistic about the probability of locating an acceptable solution. Coderque told the Ambassador that he intended to speak very frankly about these concerns with the Secretary General of the Malian Presidency, Django Sissoko, and the influential Minister of Territorial Administration, General Kafougouna Kone. Coderque said he would pointedly inquire of the officials: "If the ICRC cannot work in north east Mali, then who can?"

6.(C) The Ambassador noted that security within the city limits of large towns like Gao and Kidal seemed to be relatively manageable. Coderque agreed with this assessment and said the ICRC has in fact recently taken to ferrying representatives by air up to Kidal in order to avoid traveling overland from Gao. Apart from the evident costs involved, Coderque said the ICRC still needed to visit remote towns like Tinzawaten and Abeibara which can only be reached by road.

7.(C) Coderque asked if one could reliably assume, based on AQIM's recent insistence that the two Canadian diplomats and four European tourists were captured in Niger rather than in Mali, that the terrorist group would refrain from kidnapping westerners on Malian soil. We noted that the frontiers dividing Mali from its neighbors were highly theoretical in many places, meaning that traffickers could capture someone in Mali and claim that the incident occurred elsewhere. We also opined that AQIM members are not necessarily all equally committed to the apparent "official" AQIM position that hostages should not be captured in Mali (as distinct from being transferred here). The Ambassador said the best way to prevent new hostage crises was to not pay ransoms for the release of those already in captivity.

8.(C) Coderque also asked for the Embassy's assessment of security in Gao, where the ICRC has an official delegate, noting that Gao was the site of several hand grenade incidents during in early January 2009. We explained that

the city of Gao is not part of our travel warning and travel to the town itself does not require Chief of Mission approval. Travel to other parts of the Gao region, on the other hand, are included in our travel restrictions. Regarding the hand grenade incidents, we stated our belief that these incidents were the product of internal political rivalries which at the moment posed no threat to outsiders and were in no way linked to AQIM (Refs. B and C).

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Visiting Captured AQIM Suspects  
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9.(C) Coderque said the second objective of his visit to Mali was to request permission for the ICRC to visit "Islamic radicals" imprisoned by Malian authorities. Coderque acknowledge that the question of captured Islamic radicals was a delicate one, but argued that it also presented an opportunity. Noting that the ICRC visits terrorism detainees in Guantanamo and elsewhere, Coderque said that an ICRC visit to captured AQIM members in Mali, and an attempt to perhaps but those detainees in touch with family members in Mauritania or elsewhere, could produce a reciprocal improvement in the living conditions of the six westerners currently held by AQIM.

10.(C) The ICRC asked if the Embassy would support a request to visit Islamic radicals arrested by the Malian government. The Ambassador said that the U.S. supported ICRC activities and that visiting detainees in Mali fell within the realm of responsibility of the ICRC. The Ambassador noted, however, that U.S. support for the ICRC request would likely not impact Mali's internal decision making processes. NOTE: The two Mauritanian AQIM suspects were transferred from Gao to Bamako on February 26. During the 14 hour drive, however, the State Security (DGSE) vehicle transporting the prisoners crashed, killing four DGSE officers and seriously wounding a fifth. Two Malian newspapers have reported the accident, minus the details of who was being transported to Bamako from Gao and by whom. Both prisoners were injured, with one later having succumbed to his injuries at a hospital in Bamako. The death of this individual was reported by Radio France on March 6. END NOTE.

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Visiting Captured Tuareg Rebels  
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11.(C) The ICRC is still struggling to obtain access to all Tuareg rebel detainees in Mali. In January the ICRC representative in Bamako told the Embassy that the ICRC had been unable to visit eight Tuareg rebels captured by the Malians on January 12. One member of this group of captured rebels died on January 15, one day after being transferred to Bamako from Kidal. On January 28 the ICRC's Niger based Director for the Sahel, Nicolai Panke, asked for the Embassy's help in convincing the Malians to allow ICRC access to captured Tuareg rebels. On February 25, the local ICRC representative told the Embassy that the ICRC had made moderate progress and managed to see some Tuareg prisoners in Bamako, but said the number of Tuareg prisoners in Malian custody remained unclear. The representative also said the ICRC was unable to determine whether any of the prisoners it visited were among those captured on January 12. Coderque reiterated these concerns, stating that the ICRC had made some progress in visiting Tuareg prisoners but that it was unclear just how many prisoners there were and which individuals had been captured when.

12.(C) Coderque said he had no information regarding the January 15 death of the Tuareg rebel prisoner noted above. On February 18 presidential insider Kader Bah told the Embassy that the dead Tuareg prisoner had been severely beaten by the Malian forces that captured him on January 12.

It was unclear whether those responsible were regular Malian military units or members of para-military militias. Bah had previously told the Embassy that the individual had been ill and that Mali had given the body to Algeria for an independent autopsy (Ref. D). We have heard nothing regarding this autopsy since mid-January. On February 19 presidential advisor Acherif ag Mohamed told the Embassy that he too believed that the captured Tuareg's death had been the result of wounds inflicted by those responsible for his capture on January 12. Acherif said he believed the Arab militia led by Malian military officer, Col. Abderahmaneould Meydou, was responsible.

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Comment: No Security, No ICRC  
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13.(C) Since Tuareg unrest resumed in May 2006, a standard refrain among Mali's development partners has been: no security, no development. This has spawned a chicken and egg type debate involving Malian officials and northern leaders over which comes first, security or development. For the international community, the answer is clear: security. The disarmament of Tuareg rebels in February in Kidal and the military defeat of rogue rebel leader Ibrahim Bahanga seemed to indicate, for the first time in months, that things were finally looking up in northern Mali and that security concerns could be once again scaled back to the random hold-up by bandits looking for 4x4 vehicles and cash. AQIM's new strategy of paying traffickers and bandits for captured westerners, however, has added an entirely new dimension that trumps anything served up by Tuareg rebel groups. While the ICRC's message to the Malian government - no security, no ICRC - is unlikely to spark the Malians to action, it serves as yet another example of the negative consequences that befall civilian populations which have the misfortune of living in proximity to AQIM.

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